

## **A relationship spanning more than 40 Years – the case of Portugal**

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There is a sense in which for a seasoned traveller like Camille Saint-Saëns, who made professional visits to so many countries, Portugal could be seen as just another to be ticked off on a checklist. And Lisbon, its capital, received visits from so many renowned musicians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that he could just as easily be seen as yet another on a list of its own. And yet, as the master realised, each place had its own particularities and each its own individuals, and as the Portuguese came to recognise, he was himself a very particular and special individual.

He made three professional visits to Portugal – in 1880, 1906 and 1914 – and passed through Lisbon a fourth time on his way back from South America, in 1916. But he also remained firmly in touch with the exiled Portuguese royal family, right up to the time of his death. This relationship with Portugal and the Portuguese was to be a fruitful one through the composition of two new works: “Une nuit à Lisbonne”, in 1880, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Organ Fantasy, in 1919. In this paper, I will sketch a double narrative – that of his visits and how he was received; but also the story of his relationship with the Portuguese royal family, first in Portugal and later in exile.

“We must go to the São Carlos...” Thus the 15<sup>th</sup> November 1880 edition of the weekly *Occidente* exhorted its readers retrospectively to attend the four concerts that Saint-Saëns had taken part in at the Lisbon opera house, on 5<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of that month. The *Diário da Manhã* of 7<sup>th</sup> November reported, “He plays the piano astonishingly”, adding that “as a maestro he is no less amazing”. He was considered a “highly original” composer by the *Diário Popular*, of 6<sup>th</sup> November – the “Danse Macabre” made such an impression that it had to be encored at the first concert and included in all of the remaining three. To summarise, in the words of the *Revolução de Setembro* of 9<sup>th</sup> November, “Saint-Saëns is the first really notable figure to be heard in Portugal.”

Yet, despite this enthusiasm on the part of public and critics, the second concert was virtually empty, owing to a rival attraction: the circus at the Coliseu dos Recreios. The Oporto newspaper, *O Primeiro de Janeiro*, received news from Lisbon that no more than 50 people had attended in the stalls and almost all the boxes had been empty. The satirist and caricaturist Raphael Bordalo Pinheiro was so scandalised by this that he

drew a series of caricatures published in the *António Maria*, of 11<sup>th</sup> November, warning that in the next concert the composer “instead of performing Beethoven... promises to line a hoop with a leaf from a symphony and pierce the said hoop with a somersault”. Bordalo Pinheiro’s attack, along with the embarrassment of other critics, and the boundless admiration they reported from those few present, seem to have had their effect. For the remaining two concerts, particularly the last, the theatre was much closer to being full.

In his last concert, the master presented himself as pianist, organist, conductor and composer. In this, as in the other concerts, however, he was not the only artist performing, his own contributions being intermingled with opera arias by other composers sung by members of the resident company and conducted by the resident conductors Raffaele Kuon and Arturo Pontecchi. Taking the four concerts as a whole, among his own works, as well as “Danse Macabre”, he conducted the “Marche Héroïque”, the Suite, op. 49, Prélude from *Le Deluge*, played the piano in concertos 2 and 4, and the organ, on the theatre’s small Cavaillé-Coll, in the 1<sup>st</sup> Fantasy. He also played the piano in Beethoven’s C-minor concerto and an unidentified sonata, almost certainly op. 26, Chopin’s Barcarolle and an unidentified nocturne, Liszt’s Hungarian Fantasy and Rameau’s “Les Cyclopes”. Filling the rest of the programmes, with the singers and orchestra, were operatic excerpts and other short works, among others, by Auber, Donizetti, Verdi, Gounod, and the Portuguese composer Augusto Machado.

Noteworthy in the final concert, on 13<sup>th</sup> November, was the premiere of Saint-Saëns’ orchestral barcarolle “Une nuit à Lisbonne” – several weeks before the Paris performance, on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1881, given by Jean Bonnerot as the first and, following him, by Sabina Teller Ratner. He had composed it in Lisbon and dedicated it to the musician-king Luís I, who was present at the concert, together with Queen Maria Pia. He also presented the King with a manuscript copy for piano, held today at the Ajuda Library, the former royal library. It differs slightly from the published piano version and presumably represents a copy of the composer’s original rough piano version, which he orchestrated for performance.

At the premiere this gently lilting, dreamy piece was placed between Machado’s work and the lively “Jota aragonesa”, written shortly before in Madrid. The reception in the press was somewhat mixed. According to the *Revolução de Setembro*, it was very well received, but Bordalo Pinheiro in the *António Maria* evidently found it sleep-inducing.

The composer himself in correspondence to his publisher, Auguste Durand, frustratingly says nothing of his stay in Lisbon, except that he had composed this short barcarolle for orchestra there and that, together, it and the “Jota Aragonesa” would make an attractive pair of “souvenirs de voyage”. In actual fact, “Une nuit à Lisbonne” was subsequently published in a greater variety of versions than the “Jota Aragonesa”, which probably explains in part its wider subsequent dissemination, including in Rio de Janeiro, in 1899, and San Francisco, in 1915, conducted by the composer. The piano version was published not only by Durand, but also in the Parisian periodical *Album-Musica*, musical supplement of the periodical *Musica*.

The 1880 visit marked only the beginning of the relationship between Saint-Saëns, and Portugal and its Royal Family. In April 1906, the composer returned to give two concerts in Lisbon and one in Oporto. He was now 70 years old and universally recognised as one of the greatest living musicians. In anticipation of the concerts, the impresario of the São Carlos, José Pacini, gave a dinner in honour of Saint-Saëns, the maestro Luigi Mancinelli and Umberto Giordano, the illustrious composer of *Andrea Chenier* and *Fedora*, who was also present in Lisbon.

In Lisbon, the programme for the two concerts, on consecutive days, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> April, was identical. Centred on works (or versions of works) for piano and orchestra, with Mancinelli conducting, it included the Beethoven ‘Emperor’ Concerto and his own *Africa*, “Wedding Cake: valse caprice” and “Rapsodie d’Auvergne”, as well as solos on the organ: one of the Fantasies, his arrangement of “O salutaris”, from the Mass, op. 4, and one of the Rapsodies Brétonnes, op. 7. As encores he played two piano solos: one of the waltzes and the Gavotte, op. 23. His reception was rapturous and the newspapers unanimous in their praise.

In a letter from the composer, dated 12<sup>th</sup> April, at the Hotel Bragança, Lisbon, published in the Paris newspaper *Le temps*, of 22<sup>nd</sup> June, the composer makes reference to the singular honour paid him by the Portuguese Royal Family in attending both of his performances. Indeed, the first night, present were King Carlos, Queen Amélia, the Dowager Queen Maria Pia (who had of course heard him in 1880), and Prince Afonso; the second night, once again the King and Queen, the Crown Prince Luís Filipe, and the Princes Manoel and Afonso.

During this visit Saint-Saëns also had a private audience with Queen Amélia, who being of French origin herself, of the house of Orléans, evidently felt a particular affinity with her compatriot. In his memoirs *École Buissonnière* (Paris, 1913), he tells us:

“Her Majesty Queen Amélia of Portugal honoured me singularly: she received me in private, without ladies-in-waiting, which enabled her to forego all etiquette and have me sit down in an armchair beside her; and in this intimacy, she entertained me for a good three quarters of an hour, asking me about all kinds of things.” At the end of the meeting she lamented, “I have to leave you, but not because I want to; when you exercise the role of queen conscientiously, it isn’t always much fun.”

At Oporto he gave a single concert at the city’s principal theatre, the Teatro de São João, on 14<sup>th</sup> April. This time it was a solo piano recital in three parts: the first devoted to Johann Sebastian Bach (including the Italian Concerto), Rameau (“Les Cyclopes” and “Les tourbillons”) and Beethoven (the sonata, op. 26, and an arrangement of the adagio from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Symphony); the second part consisting of 4 pieces by Chopin, a transcription of the Finale of his *Samson et Dalila* and the “Caprices sur les airs de ballet d’Alceste de Gluck”; the third part was entirely made up of pieces of his own: four waltzes (mignonne, nonchalante, langoureuse and canariote), as well as the Rapsodie d’Auvergne. To judge from his letter to Durand, dated 15<sup>th</sup> April, this was the public première of the “Valse langoureuse”. Expectations for the concert could not have been higher and, to judge from both his letter and the press, were fully met.

The following night, before his return to Paris, Saint-Saëns decided to attend a performance of Meyerbeer’s opera *L’Africaine*, being given at one of the smaller Oporto theatres, the Teatro da Águia d’Ouro. At the end of the first act, he was recognised by various members of the public. To quote the local newspaper, *O Primeiro de Janeiro*, of 17<sup>th</sup> April, “When the great composer entered the auditorium to attend the second act, everyone broke out in rapturous applause, which went on for some time, amid “bravos” and “vivas”, which ran effusively all around the room. The illustrious “maestro”, taken completely by surprise, and much moved, thanked everyone for this tribute so spontaneous and sincere.”

The news of the Regicide of 1<sup>st</sup> February 1908, in which not only King Carlos but also Crown Prince Luís Filipe were assassinated, shook Saint-Saëns, who recalled Queen Amélia’s prophetic words. No doubt, it brought to mind his own personal family tragedies: the loss of his father when he was still a baby and of his own two children. He clearly identified in this respect with both the new King, Manoel, and with Queen Amélia. Their days in Portugal, however, were numbered. On 5<sup>th</sup> October 1910 Portugal was declared a republic and the royal family left for exile in London.

And so, for a moment, our attention switches to London. On 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1913, Saint-Saëns was there for the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his first concert performance. He wrote that evening to Jacques Durand telling something of the occasion and adding, “The deposed King Manoel and his mother were there and after the concert made such demonstrations of friendship that I felt that huge emotion that I ought to have had before the instrument but which I have never had there.” Indeed, such was the impact of this reunion that he felt the need to write about it in the *L’Echo de Paris* the following Sunday (8<sup>th</sup> April), together with the story of his private visit to their home in Richmond two days later, in which he found Manoel on his own and was utterly charmed by his kindness and simplicity.

In May and early June the following year he was in republican Portugal to conduct two performances each of *Samson et Dalila* and *Proserpine*, this time at the Coliseu dos Recreios – a huge space, where the rival circus had deprived him of an audience back in 1880, but which, following the revolution, was the only place where opera was being staged. Such was Saint-Saëns’ status now that the public could scarcely believe the notices advertising his presence. He rehearsed the principal singers himself and was pleased with what he found. The Spanish singers Luis Canalda and Dolores Frau respectively took the roles of Samson and Dalila; the protagonist of *Proserpine*, was the celebrated Romanian soprano Hariclea Darclee, who just days before there had been singing Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*.

At each performance there was a massive ovation when Saint-Saëns entered the stage, before he had even begun. The performances of *Samson et Dalila*, already well known to the Lisbon public, were received with enormous enthusiasm; *Proserpine*, an opera they had not heard before, somewhat less so. The anonymous critic of the *Diário de Notícias*, but certainly the musician Júlio Neuparth, gave a detailed account of the music, having mixed feelings about it, but particularly praising the 2<sup>nd</sup> act. The first nights of both operas were attended by the President of the Republic, Manoel da Arriaga, who received the composer-maestro in the Presidential Box. Between the first two acts of the opening night of *Proserpine*, Saint-Saëns received a small deputation of leading figures from the National Conservatoire.

During this visit he also met Miguel Ângelo Lambertini, director of the instrument museum and gave him an autographed cabinet photo. At the latter’s request, he also copied out a short autographed excerpt from *Proserpine*. Both are still to be found at the National Music Museum, Lisbon.

Little over a month after this visit, War broke out and, as we know, Saint-Saëns made creative use of the travel limitations that this imposed, by visiting the United States for the Great Exhibition of San Francisco in 1915 and South America in 1916. In a letter to Jacques Durand, dated Buenos Aires, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1916, he complained of a paralysis affecting his legs and to some extent his left hand. He put this down simply to overtiredness, but to judge from his description, he had almost certainly suffered a mild stroke. He cancelled the last leg of his tour, in Rio de Janeiro, and instead of returning to Europe via Genoa, as he had planned, came back directly through Lisbon. He checked in at the Avenida Palace Hotel, where he had stayed two years before, writing to Durand on 13<sup>th</sup> August to confirm his arrival, as well as his travel plans for the coming days.

Though this was his last visit to Portugal, it was by no means the end of the Portuguese connection. Ever since the 1913 reencounter, though necessarily interrupted by the War, Saint-Saëns and the exiled King Manoel, exchanged correspondence on a regular though not frequent basis. Immediately following the War, the latter had an organ built for the Chapel at his new mansion in Twickenham, so that he could play and practise. As part of this project, he commissioned a new piece from Saint-Saëns. The composer, in a letter to Durand, dated 14<sup>th</sup> June 1919, privately expressed certain misgivings. “King Manoël has written that he has been having an organ installed and that he would really like a piece by me to work on; I have just done one for him. I don’t know if I shall give it to you; the king’s virtuosity is doubtful, I have had to avoid difficulties; and then commissioned pieces are just not my speciality. When you see me again, I can show it to you and you can tell me what you think.” He soon sent the 3<sup>rd</sup> Organ Fantasy to King Manoel. In another letter to Jacques Durand, dated 16<sup>th</sup> September, he described the piece as “faultless” and “miraculous”. While avoiding great technical difficulties, it is absolutely worthy of the composer, and if it lacks the obvious exuberance, for example, of the 1<sup>st</sup> Fantasy, it is a reflective work of gentle subtlety that grows on listener or performer alike. Charles-Marie Widor in a letter to Saint-Saëns dated 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1919, described it as “charming” and promised to play it the next Sunday at St. Sulpice. This was probably its premiere.

Yet even here the story does not end. On 9<sup>th</sup> November 1921, *Ascanio* was revived at the Paris Opéra. According to the memoirs of Jacques Durand, during one of the intervals the composer noticed that in one of the boxes was King Manoel and Queen Amélia, and wasted no time in going up to see them. It was to be their last meeting. The

next day, Camille Saint-Saëns left for Algiers, never to return. However, before doing so, he wrote a dedication to King Manoel on a copy of *Ascanio*, leaving strict instructions to Durand to make sure that he received it before leaving for London later that day. Both that copy and another of *Samson et Dalila*, which the composer had sent the King in 1913, were sold at auction in Lisbon in 1989. And that, I am afraid, is as much as I know.